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1985/09/27



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BUREAU OF
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(U) A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE OF THE
US SECURITY POSTURE IN ASIA^{1/}

Summary

China's policy toward a US security presence in Asia reflects the requirements of complex and at times conflicting security interests. These center on Chinese perceptions of the Soviet threat and on the priorities established for China's extensive national, ideological, and military goals. In the main:

- The Chinese are worried about Soviet expansionism in Asia--especially in Indochina, Afghanistan, and Mongolia--and see a US military presence and the US alliances in Asia as the best counterweight to the USSR. The Chinese also regard the US and its allies as important to their strategic goal of economic modernization.
- But out of concern for its Third World, non-aligned image, China does not desire explicit security ties to the US and continues to balance between the superpowers. China is improving its relations with the USSR slightly as Soviet power declines relative to US strength, but a close Sino-Soviet relationship is unlikely.
- The Chinese are worried that a substantive US-Soviet detente would reduce China's own strategic significance and fear that a US-Soviet arms control agreement might reduce nuclear arms in Europe at the expense of Asia.

^{1/} This report was prepared by an INR consultant, Professor Fred Greene of Williams College. The views expressed herein are those of the author and not those of the Department of State.

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--China strongly supports the maintenance of US forces, including nuclear weapons, in Asia at levels comparable to those of the USSR. The Chinese feel that the US military presence in Japan obviates the need for extensive Japanese rearment, and US forces in South Korea are seen as a stabilizing element in the area.

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The Soviet Threat

Although the Chinese discount the likelihood of an actual Soviet attack and see their improved nuclear arsenal as enhancing their own deterrent position, they still must be concerned about the military imbalance on their northern front. As the Soviet buildup and modernization effort steadily continues, the gap between the two forces widens.

China also has changed its view about the main geographic thrust of the Soviet effort. Instead of asserting that Moscow will feint to the east and attack the west, it now talks about a southward strategy, which it finds worrisome. This is the old encirclement fear in modern guise, with Soviet bases now in Afghanistan and Vietnam as well as Mongolia.

The Chinese view Soviet power and military assistance programs as Moscow's main instruments in the strategy of extending its political influence for ominous purposes. This form of encirclement, if not a direct military threat, is still perceived as serving Soviet efforts to intimidate China and so reduce its freedom to conduct foreign policy as it wishes, thus denying to China its rightful role in Asian affairs.

The US Counterweight

The Chinese see the US as the only strategic counterweight to this oppressive Soviet presence. The US offers China its only available leverage in dealing with the USSR and, in fact, alone stands in the way of Soviet domination. Thus, China seeks a solid, if limited, relationship with the US to deal flexibly with the USSR, even though it does not expect (or currently desire) a close military relationship involving joint planning or defense coordination with Washington.

Parallel Interests

The US tie also helps China to sustain its position and influence on issues where the interests of the two parties coincide, such as Indochina and Afghanistan. This indicates a willingness to undertake some limited security collaboration--i.e., some consultation on strategic questions and parallel, if not coordinated, foreign policy actions. China also will continue to rely on a strong US-Japanese security link both to protect Japan from Soviet pressure and to avert Japanese remilitarization.

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More generally, China sees this alliance as countering the growing Soviet military power in Asia. China similarly probably will continue to accept the US presence in Korea, to strengthen the stability of that peninsula.

Economic Modernization

A third consideration, in addition to China's own security and questions of regional stability, is economic modernization. Here China has extensive interests in the areas of bilateral US trade and investment; mineral and oil explorations, the transfer of essential technology, and support for its crash effort to catch up on technical education. The recent liberalizing of US exports in fields related to military technology undoubtedly will help China accelerate its nuclear program and upgrade both strategic and tactical weapons in the wake of continued Soviet improvements. At the conventional level, anti-tank and anti-air weapons, radar, transport vehicles, coastal defense, and communications facilities all have high priority. However, because of its emphasis on independence, economic modernization, and keeping costs down, China also has been negotiating with Western Europe and is still determining its weapons-procurement policy.

China perhaps worries most about an arms control accord that clearly indicates a US priority for Europe over Asia. That would lead to a Soviet claim of a US sellout of China and so impair China's capacity for dealing with the USSR. The Chinese consequently exert influence on the US to prevent such a development. They do so mainly by indirection--via public statements or through Japanese channels (because Tokyo shares many of these concerns)--for fear that a direct approach to the US might make them susceptible to US pressure on other matters.

Limits to US Cooperation

As their maneuvering regarding arms control indicates, the Chinese wish to keep a certain distance from the US as a matter of general policy. This orientation has a major impact on China's overall security perspective and stems from many factors. A commitment to independence is a major motive, because it is essential for China to maintain a high degree of maneuverability between the superpowers. While China acknowledges that the Soviet Union is a major threat and implicitly recognizes the pivotal role of the US in reducing that threat, China takes every measure possible to prevent the appearance of reliance on the US.

Reflecting in part a wish to avoid inhibitions on the conduct of other aspects of its foreign policy, China trumpets what it claims is the increasing weakness of the two superpowers, implying a decline in their influence over allies and client states. This

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position in turn has led China to distance itself publicly from the US as frequently as it deems prudent. The call in April 1985 for a freeze on missile deployments in Europe and for the non-militarization of space is a recent case in point.

Other motivating factors include maintenance of Third World credentials, the Taiwan issue, persistent ideological differences with the US, and a determination to minimize the cost of US protection.

Improved Soviet Ties

As part of this tactical adjustment, both to reduce the level of threat and to improve its bargaining position in dealing with the US and the USSR, China in recent years has been probing Soviet willingness to reduce tensions. This effort has led to more frequent and higher level diplomatic contacts, some thawing in party relations, and improved economic and related ties. Although it still seeks to counter Soviet designs and remains genuinely committed to its three main demands (Soviet border forces reduction, departure from Afghanistan, and end of support for Vietnam), China has sought to avoid provocations. Even the recent major Vietnamese offensive against Cambodian resistance forces did not elicit a major Chinese reaction.

China probably will do its best to avoid returning to a position of overt hostility to the USSR, though it is unlikely to move close to Moscow, even if compromises are reached on major security issues. Soviet power is too great and Chinese suspicions too deep for a general rapprochement. The problem of Soviet power, in the final analysis, also restricts China's capacity to maneuver between the superpowers to the degree that it would prefer.

Superpower Balance

Under present conditions, China probably sees its security as best maintained by its current policy of limited links to the US and limited hostility toward the USSR. China also depends on continued Soviet-US rivalry to maintain Chinese leverage vis-a-vis each superpower. Conversely, a severe increase in superpower rivalry and tension would be inimical to Chinese interests: China would not want to have to choose between the two rivals in an intensified, renewed Cold War situation. For example, it avoided such a choice in the Korean Airlines incident of September 1983.

From a US perspective, improved Soviet-US relations might benefit Washington by making China uncertain of the US position. This could enhance the US bargaining position in various areas of negotiation with China, including security matters.

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The Chinese View of the US Force Presence in Asia

The Chinese desire a significant US force presence in Asia, both for its direct security and diplomatic benefit to China and to maintain a regional balance of power. They do not desire a US combat force presence on their soil, however, for the foreseeable future. They would quietly favor incremental improvements in the US force posture if these were perceived to match increases in the strength of Soviet regional forces.

The Chinese undoubtedly would react with concern to a major US buildup on the grounds that it could increase tension in the area. On the other hand, a significant drawdown of the US force presence would raise fears of Soviet achievement of a dominant position in the region.

Current Force Presence Enhances China's Security and Autonomy. The exact composition and deployment of US power in Asia is not a crucial factor to China as long as the US has on hand sufficient nuclear and conventional strength, an adequate basing system, and a capacity to move additional forces to the region as required. China would be quite concerned with an erosion of this capacity, such as a loss of air and naval bases in the Philippines.

A major naval surface presence is a critical component of US forces to the Chinese, particularly because the US retains marked superiority over the USSR in this category. To a considerable degree, such a naval power balance is pivotal to the US force presence in the western Pacific. Thus, raising the non-nuclear issue as a condition for a naval visit to Shanghai can only work against such a major Chinese interest. Yet, so strong must be the pull to appear nonaligned and to keep Third World credentials that China must have felt compelled at least to match the ban imposed by New Zealand.

The fact that China has to bear no direct alliance costs for the benefits of the US force presence makes it all the more advantageous, but the naval visit incident reflects how grudging Beijing is to pay even a minimal price for its US connection. China may estimate, given the intensity of current US-Soviet antagonisms, that it can well afford the luxury of attending to its other interests rather than nurturing this aspect of its embryonic security links to the US.

Acquisition of US Military Equipment. Despite such incidents, China may feel that its US security connection is on a solid enough footing to enable it to acquire military and defense-related equipment--within limits of what the US is willing to provide--whenever it so decides. That this is an important concern to Moscow was indicated in the early 1970s when the Soviets

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reacted to the US-Chinese rapprochement by admonishing the US, with some success for a time, not to include arms transfers in the new relationship. Without a serious US force presence today, the Soviets undoubtedly would exert great pressure on China to desist from acquiring from abroad even modern conventional weapons, let alone the capability to manufacture them.

Stability of Japan and Korea. Chinese fears of both excessive Japanese concessions to the USSR and a massive Japanese rearmament to cope with the Soviet threat are neatly resolved by the US-Japan security treaty, the US base and force presence in Japan, and Japan's limited Self-Defense Forces. The Chinese were admittedly slow to see the advantage of the present arrangement, but they have been its strong supporters for more than a decade. They have so informed the Japanese and do not believe that the US force presence there is provocative. Thus, the Chinese did not accept the Soviet argument a few years ago that Moscow deployed the SS-20 in Asia as a response to the US stationing of F-16 fighter planes in Japan.

A similar situation seems to prevail regarding Korea. Although it supports Kim Il-sung and his northern regime as the only legitimate claimant to rule in Korea, China has not strenuously called for the removal of US forces from the South.

China recognizes the stabilizing effect of this presence and fears a rise in Soviet power, perhaps combined with a major change in Japanese security policy, as a consequence of a US withdrawal from the peninsula.

US Strategic Deployments. China undoubtedly continues to favor the naval basing and support system that runs from Japan to the Philippines, Australia, and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Fully aware of the Soviet naval buildup, China in recent years either has not commented on such US facilities or has praised them and urged their retention. China's policy toward US air bases is similar to some extent. China even tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Thailand from terminating the US air base arrangements there a decade ago, at the end of the Vietnam war.

The Chinese today probably do not wish to see a US intermediate-range nuclear forces surface presence in Asia, however, either on the mainland or on island bases. Because they have not recently criticized major specific US defense efforts in the Pacific, they might not voice opposition if the US decided on such a move. But their evident preference is for a continually improved and upgraded US strategic missile capability based at sea.

Maintenance of a Balance of Power. Even though the Soviet Union has significantly upgraded all categories of its forces in

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Asia, the Chinese do not expect a massive US response. With the Soviet threat reduced for the immediate future and the danger therefore manageable through a series of diplomatic talks and other arrangements, the Chinese now express concern over a possible upsurge in US assertiveness. Thus, they were critical of US actions in Grenada and Lebanon and fear that, if the US develops new instruments of power, it will be inclined to employ them much as it employed the doctrine of counterinsurgency in the 1960s.

Enhancing China's Capacity for Regional Action. Finally, a significant US force presence that maintains the balance in Asia affords Beijing considerable leeway in dealing autonomously with issues--the subcontinent and Indochina--on which it shares common interests with the US. Both these areas present dilemmas for China, because Soviet power checks it from doing as much as it would like for its Pakistani ally and the Cambodian resistance. China continues to help Pakistan in a limited fashion and to harass Vietnam. Although a local threat in itself, Vietnam could be a worrisome second front in a major confrontation with the USSR.

To a limited degree, such Chinese actions are consonant with US interests. The US force presence does act to some degree to inhibit Soviet reactions to limited Chinese moves, but this setting could evolve into a Soviet-US confrontation that neither superpower desires.

At a less dramatic level, a more conciliatory Vietnamese posture toward the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) might create a political-military dilemma for the US. Such a move by Vietnam could bring about a split between China and ASEAN as to how to respond. This would enable Vietnam and the USSR to play on the strong anti-Chinese feelings in Southeast Asia. The US would then face the unhappy task of mediating between these two sets of friends, while the Soviets retained or expanded their military presence in Vietnam. The burden of such developments could bring on a major turning point in the security relationship between the US and China, leading to much closer cooperation or a cooling of relations between the two states.

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